

On January 25 Wolfgang Droege, leader of the white supremacist Heritage Front (HF), was ordered to appear before a Human Rights tribunal to answer charges of hate propaganda. The charges, brought against the HF by Rodney Bobiwash and the Native Canadian Centre, focused on a 1976 'hate line' expressing the Heritage Front's racist, sexist and homophobic 'political' perspective. On previous occasions, white supremacists have appeared at court proceedings with a militant entourage. In this case, the HF planned a public march across Nathan Phillips Square with a core of supporters, hoping to accompany Droege and his lawyer into the courtroom.

Anti-Racist Action (ARA), a Toronto coalition dedicated to counter fascist activity, arranged a rally intended to reduce the intimidation potential posed by organized HF supporters. ARA, formed in September of 1992, is composed of members from the full range of the social and political spectrum. Along with demonstrations, ARA's tactics include informing high school and public school students about white supremacist recruiting. ARA has not shied away from exposing perceived police discrimination.

ARA, as well as numerous similar groups, recognizes the rise of worldwide neo-nazi activity, particularly in Germany, as a very real concern. The Heritage Front is considered by other 'Aryan' groups as the vanguard of the Canadian neo-nazi movement. They are reported to have links to both the paramilitary Church of the Creator (COTC) and the Ku Klux Klan.

WHAT HAPPENED

The ARA protesters gathered outside Queen's Park in the bitter cold at 8:45 am on January 25. The crowd swelled to over 500 people as ARA marshals described the route over a megaphone and attempted to distribute lawyer's numbers in case of arrest. The group linked arms in ranks of 15 to 20 and proceeded south down University Avenue. Protesters carried signs with anti-racist slogans and chanted "The Heritage Front is a nazi front". A small police presence maintained a watchful eye, blocking intersections as the rally approached the courthouse.

White supremacists, over the prior weekend, had made statements that a "racial holy war" had begun. ARA spotters on bicycles brought back reports that only a handful of HF sympathizers were gathered around Droege in a lonely corner on the east side of Nathan Phillips Square.

The ARA marched filed through the west access to the square at 9:30 am and stopped in ranks at the approach to the courthouse steps. Within 30 minutes, spotters informed the anti-racists that approximately 50 HF members were crossing the square, escorted by the police. They were playing 'Dixie' on a tape recorder, chanting white power slogans and carrying a banner. Nine mounted riot police moved into position nose to nose with the front line of the ARA. A cordon of foot officers secured the stairway to the courthouse. No attempt was made by the protesters to block that access. Chanting rose to a crescendo as the HF came into view.

Droege was apparently unable to secure a lawyer willing to support him in a potentially volatile situation. He was forced to settle for Ken Ernst, a 22 year old Queen's University student who volunteered despite lacking formal legal training.

Without warning, a single mounted officer began edging his horse into the ranks of the ARA marchers. The anti-racists began to shout and stamp their feet as the mounted officers seemed prepared to charge. Standing in the front row, I attempted to yell at the mounted officer whose horse was breathing directly into my face. I asked him to move back, explaining that nothing was going to happen. Almost immediately I was swept aside as the mounted cops stormed

HATE, LIES AND PUBLIC DEMONSTRATION

When Anti-Racist Action planned a rally against Droege's Heritage Front, the last confrontation they expected was with Toronto's finest . . .



BY M. THURGOOD

into the crowd. As the HF filed by to my left, the momentum of the police charge drove the split ranks of the front line demonstrators towards the HF's police escort. Behind me, mounted police officers beat protesters with heavy riding crops. Wedged in between horses and foot officers, I was grabbed by a grinning policeman who, calling me an "asshole", punched me repeatedly in the face while another jabbed me in the ribs. Beside me, my companion discovered his foot had been crushed by a rearing horse. The HF members mounted the stairs unhindered except by a smattering of eggs and snowballs; their presence merely a sideshow to the police violence I witnessed.

Within about ten minutes, the police returned to their positions and the ARA reformed, while designation first aid people to assist the injured. The media swarmed around the protesters as their chanting focused on the police - "Shame, shame, shame", "Blue by day, white by night."

As the horse cops trotted in retreat across the square, the ARA cheered and moved out in front of city hall. Leery of the regrouping mounted police, the rally headed across Queen Street and up Yonge Street to police headquarters on College. As the impromptu march headed peacefully up Yonge, an ARA supporter rushed up asking for volunteers to return to Nathan Phillips Square to protect the injured and first aid people left behind by the rest of the rally.

At police headquarters, demonstrators voiced their disapproval of the police action punctuated with a few tossed eggs. At Queen's Park, the rally dispersed quickly.

As a large splinter group moved west along College, with the media still in tow, police cruisers drew up and officers arrested a man. As others protested, another man spat and was immediately arrested for assault. While an angry crowd began to encircle the cruisers, the police ceased their 'buffet sampling' operation and allowed the rest of the anti-racists to continue unharrassed.

THE FALLOUT

The initial media response was positive. The Toronto Star ran an objective first-hand account in their evening edition. A later radio report described the mounted police "side-stepping" their horses into the crowd after they refused an order to move back. As I was in the front line, I can reliably state that no such request was issued; nor were there any officers equipped with public address systems. TV news stories told of rocks being thrown and jumbled video chronology attempted to implicate demonstrators' provocation of the police reaction. Focus was placed on an officer with a dislocated shoulder though only much later was it disclosed that his shoulder had been dislocated prior to the rally.

On the 26th, the ARA held a press conference calling for the dropping of all charges stemming from the rally and correcting any perceived media inaccuracies. On the 28th, they met with Susan Eng's Police Services Board but their request for a full inquiry into the event was refused. However, the board publicly committed to a review of police crowd control procedures - current procedures state only that the public has the right to assemble peacefully (although it is up to the discretion of the officers to define 'peaceful').

The ARA counter-rally stole the limelight from the Heritage Front as well as proving public support for anti-racist action. The action exposed again the problem of possible police biases if not the question of outright tacit complicity. It forced continued dialogue about police crowd control measures in the face of rising street activity. Most positively the high cost, both politically and economically, of policing continuing anti-racist counter demonstrations may force the police to refuse the Heritage Front their 'right' to street marchers. Most negatively, a lot of outrage people are sitting around nursing bruises and wondering why they were assaulted for doing what they knew was right.